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Identity and meaningful/meaningless work

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My work for the past 20 years has been located, loosely, in a rather amorphous area of academic thought, critical management studies (CMS) (see Fournier and Grey, 2000, for a definition and discussion). It shares its roots with Labour Process Theory in the seminal work of the journalist, Harry Braverman (1974). Braverman argued that Taylor's instigation of what would become time-and-motion management processes heralded an era of ever-tighter control over workers. Braverman's analysis, although later criticised for its failure to allow room for resistance (Meiksins, 1994), implied that all meaning had been taken out of work. CMS shares with Labour Process Theory an intense interest in control and resistance, such that these are the fracture lines around which CMS is organised (Mumby, 2005). But CMS understands that regimes of control have expanded beyond Taylor's attempts to control bodies, so that now control is sought through the manipulation of minds and psyches. This is argued, most influentially, in a seminal paper by Alvesson and Willmott (2002), that explores managerial control through the manipulation of one's very identity. Perhaps an ultimate form of control is achieved when the selves of staff members are constituted to a design defined by management, one that is to

be achieved through 'identity work' and that will result in staff investing in their own domination.

There is little room for analyses of 'meaningful work' in such a location. A vast body of literature has explored resistance against management's colonializing imperative (see Mumby et al, 2017, for a discussion), and it could be argued that notions of meaningful work are implicit in that literature. However, such an argument is tangential at best, especially as CMS has been accused of knowing what it is against rather than what it is for. That is, it is against managerialism, defined as a system of beliefs that conceives of the impossibility of there being any form of organization without managers in charge (Pollitt, 1990; Parker, 2002a). This elevation of the manager requires that staff subordinate their agency, intellect, professionalism and rights over the job to management's theories of how things should be done. It implies the proletarianisation of everyone except management, with 'work' being restricted to the sole end of achieving organizational objectives. This suggests work is becoming ever more meaningless, any identity save that of a subordinated, abjected other increasingly impossible. Meaningful work, the forms that meaningful work might take, strategies designed for developing meaningful work, and identities constituted through work that is 'meaningful' sit uneasily, if at all, in such a disciplinary perspective.

In sum, CMS seems to offer critique but perhaps little more than that so my task of thinking through what meaningful work might *mean* and its implications for identity construction has no obvious starting place. There is little exploration by critical

scholars of the sort of workplace identities that could be developed if resistance were to work, control to fail, management to be ousted and meaningful work thus become possible. There is no answer to the question: what form would such work take and what identities would be made possible through undertaking that work? Thirty years ago, perhaps, there was an assumption that, following a Marxist revolution, ownership of the means of production would be returned to the workers, implying that *ownership* equated with meaningful work. This is patently too simplistic an assumption and this body of theory has long been discredited, as has the search for some form of organizational utopia (Parker, 2002b). The concept of meaningful work (identities) therefore remains unexplored.

Indeed, as implied above, the notion of meaningful work may be difficult for critical managerial thinkers to contemplate: if work is meaningful to people, does it not open them further to exploitation through management control? Academics, for example, often claim to love their work (Knights and Clarke, 2004; Harding, Ford and Gough, 2010): does this love of our work render us more open to exploitation because of our fear of losing not just our means of earning a living, but that which gives life meaning, and us, the workers, an identity? Further, if people claimed to gain meaning from their work, critical thinkers would ask if this was a result of management's subtle mechanisms of persuasion that encourage them to profess that their work is fulfilling. Fulfilling, meaningful work could be regarded as another form of control designed by management with the aim of pacifying the workforce through persuading it that it is contented.

The task of thinking through 'meaningful work' and the identities that could be made possible through constituting one's self as someone engaged in such work is, from a critical management perspective, one fraught with empirical, practical and conceptual difficulties.

In my own work (Harding, 2013) I distinguished between labour and work. I argued that the former refers to the doing of the tasks that the job requires of us. It provides a wage or salary. The latter, on the other hand, affords the possibility of constituting an identity, a sense of self. I argued that organizations murder the me's that might have been. This argument emerged from a simple everyday observation, of hearing, over and over, a question addressed to children: what do you want to be when you grow up? In an era of neoliberalist capitalism, when the self is a project to be worked on, this question contains within itself another, that is, *who* do you want to be when you grow up? This implies agency in the obtaining of something that is wanted – the self we might be. My argument in 2013 was that organizations tend to destroy those dreams, murdering many of those potential me's. In that work, therefore, I assumed meaningful work was work that allowed the constitution of a desired identity, that is, work has meaning when it facilitates the constitution of selves we like and perhaps take pride in.

However, I now think that those arguments, although qualified by exploring the place of friendship in the workplace and ways in which managerial controls are restricted, are too limited. The theory of organization that underpinned the discussion imagined 'the' organization as a place governed by management, but with

spaces where escape from that ever-watchful eye was possible. I argued that organizations are polytopias, that is, places containing multiple, overlapping spaces, only some of which are governed by management. This chapter builds on that account to develop a theory of how work, and the identities constituted through work, can be both meaningful and meaningless because work takes place in polytopic spaces into only some of which can management penetrate. I argue that meaningful work (identity) is achieved out of the orbit of the managerial gaze. I start by returning to Karl Marx's early work to develop an account of 'meaningful' and 'meaningless' work and the identities anticipated in Marx's early thought, and then explore how people can be engaged in both, almost at the same time, because of the opportunities offered by polytopic spaces.

Meaningful and meaningless workplace identities

There are the seeds of ideas of what meaningful work might entail in early work by the young Karl Marx (1988) who, in his 26th year, wrote the scraps that remain of the *1844 Manuscripts*. He outlined a theory of a subject alienated from itself because of the conditions under which it must labour. Identity (as we call it today) emerged, for the young Marx, in the products of one's labour. One projected one's self into the products one made. Because, under capitalism, these products are taken away to be traded, one is (literally) alienated from the self who has been projected into the product. It is this early theory that offers a fertile way of conceiving of meaningful/meaningless work.

Marx did not limit his analysis to the making of a product. He argued that capitalism alienates the worker not only from her/himself, but also from their 'species being' and from their fellow (wo)men. To understand 'species being' think of a cow chewing the cud while grazing in a field all day. The cow exists only to exist; it labours (eats) to remain alive, but to be alive it is necessary that it eats. It has no consciousness (so far as we are aware) over and above the need to continue chewing and grazing. It has no 'conscious life-activity' (Marx, 1988:76). The human, in contrast, is a species being that is conscious of her/his own existence, who can ponder on her/himself as if s/he were an object, and so s/he is a 'Conscious Being' (op cit). Wo/man does not exist in isolation from other people; s/he is necessarily an active participant in the species that is the human animal (77) and as such s/he contributes to the sustenance of humankind as a whole (77). That is, s/he goes beyond her own immediate physical needs so as to contribute to the greater good, producing 'the whole of nature' (77). S/he 'forms things in accordance with the laws of beauty' (77). This, then, is a theory of meaningful work. It takes the form of a social activity that produces goods and services that contribute to individual and general flourishing.

Meaningless work is alienated work. Under capitalism (wo)man's life activity is reduced to nothing more than a means of staying alive – s/he becomes like the cow, working only to sustain physical existence. S/he moves but does not think, create, etc., etc. The worker 'must sell himself and his human identity' (1988:25) in order to survive. Workers thus 'sink .. to the level of a commodity' (69), a commodity that they themselves produce through their labour and which is itself sold. This

commoditised self, like any other commodity produced through labour, is an object in which work is 'congealed' or in which immaterial practices become material, that is, real, physical objects. So, for Marx, the conditions of capitalist organizations require that staff exist only to exist: embroiled in meaningless work, they are alienated.

This theory resonated with my own early work experience. Before I became an academic I worked on the production lines of a factory making the innards for electrical machinery. We were paid by 'piece work', that is, our pay was determined by how many capacitors we made. Reflecting back on that work now, I understand, on the one hand, that we existed only as extensions of machines that made meaningless products. We moved our hands, arms and feet and disengaged our minds – the work was so menial that it needed only the body's extension of the machine at which it sat. The capacitors, sad little plastic and metal products that may have been useful in a finished product but that of themselves had no meaning, rolled down into the collecting trays and were taken away - alien objects that belonged to the employer. But this was only part of the story. Marx's arguments are that our 'inner worlds' were impoverished by work that required no thought, skill or imagination. To the observer, the women working on those ancient machines would be seen to be busily occupied in such very mundane activity that they could not produce anything that seemed meaningful or with the potential to contribute to the good of the community. On and on they went, one repetitive motion after another, producing 2,400 capacitors each day, 12,000 each week. The machine governed all our movements, it would seem.

But that is to describe only one part of the activities in which we were engaged. Yes, at one level management's reach was omnipotent: even the time we spent on toilet breaks was monitored. There was little scope for identity work, save as that that comes from being the appendage to a machine. But I also remember that, even while appearing to the observer as extensions of the machine, much more was going on than the mere making of capacitors. There was the making of social worlds and selves (and 'species-being') within the walls of the factory, with banter between the staff, laughter, friendship-making, and care. There was lots of gossip, cakes on birthdays, tricks played on those getting married, advice about difficult life situations, and so on. In other words, it was not only capacitors that were made in that factory, but social relationships and social selves. The products – capacitors - we manufactured contained nothing of ourselves, but even while tied to the machines we constituted a social world. It was through this social world that we constituted ourselves as a member of a 'species', that is, of working class women enjoying each other's company (See Young and Wilmott, 1957/2013, for a discussion). It is this auto-biographical account that leads me to posit the possibility of being both alienated and non-alienated or, in contemporary parlance, engaged in both meaningless and meaningful work, and moving between abject, subordinated identities and social, recognition-full ones.

Neoliberalism and meaningful work

However, the shift from a manufacturing economy to a service-based one means that the types of work available today differ greatly from those of 30 or 40 years ago,

and neoliberalist theories' exploration of contemporary forms of work would seem to negate the possibility of there being any such possibility of escape from capitalism's penetrating controls. Neoliberalism refers to an epoch in which economization spreads to spheres that previously were held to be separate and distinct from economics and markets (Harvey, 2003). It is 'an order of normative reason that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life' (Brown, 2015, p. 30). Thus persons and states 'are expected to comport themselves in ways that maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their future value … through practices of entrepreneurialism, self-investment, and/or attracting investors' (Brown, 2015, p. 22). The self in neoliberal times is a project that has to be managed. No longer just someone who works for a firm, the self becomes a firm in itself, devoted to maximising its human capital. The self is penetrated to its very psyche, to the capillaries of its body, by capitalism.

Neoliberalism is thus understood as a 'culture' that provides the organizing metaphors for whole spheres of life (Couldry, 2010). Not only is it a hegemonic theory of political economy (Harvey, 2005) it is also a 'mobile, calculated technology for governing subjects who are constituted as self-managing, autonomous and enterprising (Gill and Scharff, 2011, p. 5), and also 'rational, calculating and self-motivating' (ibid). Subjects are increasingly 'exhorted to make sense of their individual biographies in terms of discourses of freedom, autonomy and choice – no matter how constrained their lives may actually be' (op cit, p. 6). Neoliberalism's

tenacity is achieved, it is argued, through the production of active subjects seduced by such discourses, subjects who can best be understood as 'artefacts' rather than architects of neoliberalism (Larner, 2003). If so, then there is no possibility of being both alienated and non-alienated, as I argued above.

But theories of neoliberalism are as totalising as Marxist theory. Neoliberalism suggests staff are *super*-alienated because they can only approach the products of their labour from the position of the consumer. Such a deterministic and monolithic model has been challenged by, amongst others, Walkerdine and Bansel (2010), who coined the phrase 'super-alienated'. They illuminate the importance of understanding how 'complex, relational and rhizomatic' responses by individuals to neoliberalist modes of governance challenge such monolithic assumptions. The workers in Walkerdine and Bansel's study were defined not only by neoliberalism, but by family, communities, socialities and other quotidian influences, so that the notion of 'a stable neoliberalism that fixes a subject totally within its orbit' unravels (p. 506).

Indeed, following Butler (1990; 1993) we might argue that, there is not one self that is constructed while at work, but many selves, or there are numerous subject positions and individuals move from one to another to another, constituting notions of the self in each one as they move through them. Neo-liberal capitalism does not pin individuals, like butterflies, into one fixed position. The question follows: if capitalism or neoliberalism alienate a self from its self and there are several or many selves, which self is alienated from which? Are some forms of the self alienated, and

others not? In other words, there is a need for a more sophisticated model of both the working subject and the organization within which that subject is constituted if we are to understand the forms that meaningful work may or may not take.

The argument that follows is informed, although space allows it to be only an implicit influence, by Butler's (1990; 1993; 1997; 2004) theories of the performative constitution of a subject as it moves within and through materially-located subject positions that are the stage on which recognition as a subject is granted. This requires unravelling the notion that organizational space is singular and fixed. I will argue that organizations are polytopias, or scenes of multiple, overlapping places that offer subject positions in which one may be engaged (almost) simultaneously in meaningless/alienating work-identities and meaningful/non-alienated work-identities. That is, if organizational space/place is envisaged as multiple and fluid, then different forms of self-, identity-, work- and organization-making will take place within the same spaces/places. I will argue that meaningful work is that which is undertaken in places that are out of sight of the managerial gaze.

Meaningful work in polytopic organizational space

The thesis of organizations as polytopic understands organizations as constituted within and through multiple, overlapping 'I/spaces' in which the same material space can afford numerous identities that in turn constitute numerous places (or emplacements) within and through that space. It was inspired by Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974/1991) although it departs radically from Lefebvre's overall thesis. Lefebvre rejected Euclidian conceptions of space as something that

exists in its own right. Think of an empty room: Euclidian space understands it as existing and awaiting occupation. Lefebvre (1974/1991) demurred. He reversed the concept of empty space as something existing prior to whatever ended up filling it, and argued that space is actively *produced*.

Organizational space, following Lefebvre, is understood as both the medium and outcome of actions (Cairns et al, 2003; Kornberger and Clegg, 2004). Familiar spatial scales bundle together different 'levels' of space, such as organizational, local, regional, national, supranational and global, are not 'natural geological foundations' (Spicer, 2006, p.1470) but are socially produced, multiple scales constituted by actors engaging in political struggles. Such non-representational modes of theorising (Beyes and Steyaert, 2012; Massey, 2005; Soja, 1996) argue that there is no pre-existing or '*a priori* organization', no 'discrete and independent entity existing in one space-time framework' (Jones et al, 2004:734). In this 'loss of cosmological innocence' (Hansen, 2004:759) organizational space is understood through a performative perspective in which spatial orders are both constituted by and constitutive of participants. That is, organizational actors 'do not simply "find" an arena, [but] construct it interactively' (Haug, 2013:711). Importantly for this chapter's arguments, at the same time 'we do not simply occupy space, but rather become ourselves, in and through it' (Tyler and Cohen, 2010:192), that is, material places and spaces form parts of the selves or identities of people as they, at the same time, constitute those spaces and places. It must not be forgotten that spaces and identities materialize and are materialized by power relations (Tyler and Cohen, 2010).

Just as Butler's theories argue for a processual, performative understanding of the constitution of selves/identities, such non-representational theory argues against place and space as constant, singular and unitary. Space is, instead, conceived of as 'processual and performative, open-ended and multiple, practiced and of the everyday' (Beyes and Steyaert, 2012:47), and, indeed, encompassing a proliferation of spaces and places. Rather than space we should study 'spacing' (Beyes and Steyaert, op cit), changing a vocabulary of 'stasis, representation, reification and closure' to one of 'intensities, capacities and forces; rhythms, cycles, encounters, events, movements and flows; instincts, affects, atmospheres and auras; relations, knots and assemblages (ibid). There are thus multiple spaces in which organization happens, each of which may be invested with diverse, unstable and multiple meanings (Halford and Leonard, 2006). This is a performative concept of space, of space as 'becoming'. Thus, 'organizations are but temporary reifications' (Czarniawaska, 2004:780; see also Wapshott and Mallett, 2012).

To understand this more clearly, I initially turned to Foucault's thesis of heterotopias. Foucault, like Lefebvre, is specifically critical of Euclidian concepts of space: 'we are not living in a homogeneous and empty space ….. (1994:177). Rather, Foucault understands that space is multi-layered and constructed within conditions of power and ideology. In this non-Euclidian perspective, an organization's buildings are not empty spaces waiting to be filled up by staff and managers. Rather, the spaces of 'the organization' are actively constructed through the interactions of participants, ideologies, power, technologies, materialities and belief systems (Ford and Harding, 2004).

Foucault's concept of heterotopias informs this thesis. He had made a passing observation about heterotopia in the Preface to *The Order of Things* (1989), in which he contrasted the comfortable fantasies of utopias with heterotopias that are 'disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language' (1989:xix). That is, heterotopias focus upon the insurrection of subjugated knowledges and provide a means of interrogating, and indeed revolting against, dominant, power-laden assumptions about space. Foucault understood heterotopias as 'certain [spaces] that have the curious property of being connected to all the other emplacements, but in such a way that they suspend, neutralize, or reverse the set of relations that are designated, reflected, or represented by them' (178). They may offer challenges to power, or separate the 'deviant' from normative populations; they may articulate a society's unarticulated belief systems, but be connected with temporal discontinuities, and be both open and closed at the same time. They may juxtapose in the same space several incompatible emplacements, or may challenge the entire conception of space and place.

But although Foucault's is a theory that has 'disruptive, transient, contradictory and transformative implications' (Genocchio, 1995:42) it is, by reason of its name – 'heterotopia' - a theory of other, or different, spaces. This does not explain how it is possible to sit at a machine that governs one's actions and at the same time be free of that machine, as I recounted above, so Foucault's account takes us only so far in this argument. That is, it is not a theory of polytopias, or emplacements that are not '*ontologically single, and therefore inhabited by a finally limited number of objects,*

forces and processes that may be more or less well known. …. In the midst of representational singularity there is multiplicity. But this is not seen. The multiple or the fractional, the elusive, the vague, the partial and the fluid are being displaced into Otherness' (Law, 2004:137). In what follows, I develop a theory of polytopias that accounts for how it is possible to be seated in one space but at the same time occupy several, indeed numerous, placements in which identity/self-constitution, as well as meaningful/meaningless work, goes on (Steyeart, 2010). This theory rests on six principles.

Six principles of polytopias.

The first principle is that *the occupants of a space constitute it as emplacements in which they constitute selves/identities.* This is based on Foucault's (1994) account of emplacements as locales where speaking subjects and space are co-emergent and, importantly for a theory of polytopias, that occupants of one material space may speak from several emplacements, constituting different perspectives of the self, of identities, as they do so. Emplacements are constituted within a trialectic of power, knowledge and space (Soja, 1996).

In these diverse, multiple and norm-governed emplacements, occupants, albeit unknown to each other, constitute both the organizational space and the self (Harding, 2007). Different organizational actors may perceive and conceive of the same space as very different emplacements. In Ford and Harding's (2004) example of a hospital, nurses inhabited a village-like place, managers a grid that they traverse

during their daily work, and chief executives a fantastic space in which complexity and size collapse into the simplicities (and manageability) of a small cottage hospital. Larner and le Heron's (2005) study of changes in New Zealand's higher education system offer a similar conclusion. They argue that 'imaginaries', or the fantasies of those with power about what a sector should *be*, constitute both spaces and subjectivities through calculative practices; these constitute norms of practice that inform both the construction of material space and the occupants who occupy that space.

The second principle states that the entrance and exits of managers transforms emplacements (and thus selves) through the workings of power. To develop this principle (and others that follow) I will draw on an empirical example from an interview with someone I will call the Worker, one of a series of ad hoc interviews that aim to explore varieties of working lives, who worked in a mail sorting office alongside '*up to 500 people'.*

As seen in other studies (Anthony, 1986; Stewart et al, 1994) managers are often absent from this Worker's place of work: '*his duties will take him somewhere else, you know, so now he's here, now he's not here'.* His account shows that spaces are constituted very differently according to the presence or absence of the manager. When the manager is present workers stay at their workstations, and '*you become more active, so less talking, less socialising'* in an attempt to '*keep on top of*' the work. He describes how, when managers are present, emotions are negative. There is suspicion:

> *the numbers of managers have gone up in the last couple of years … the higher management wants to recruit more managers and then if the workforce go on strike … they can utilise the managers to get the work through … and so [they learn how to do our work].*

And loathing:

> *[One manager's] entire body language is so full of malignancy …, he's so vicious in his posture. People hate him when he's stood [behind] their back, and he likes to be where he shouldn't be ….. People don't feel comfortable, because why is he here, why is he looking at us, like we owe something to him?*

So when a manager enters into the sorting room staff focus on the tasks of sorting the mail. The Worker describes himself and his colleagues when in management's presence as 'robots', or denigrated and abject beings, who must focus solely on getting the job done while managers are watching them.

But when there are no managers present The Worker's tasks change and the social interactions of the workplace take precedence. He talks to people '*about work and talking about management you know how cunning and how vicious they are, so I'll drip some vitriol into the conversation'.* Such talk, he says, is necessary to his sense of self: *'I am not a robot, ….. I would wilt and wither if I don't talk to people'.* But also, he argues, the social side of work is vital because '*we've got all the week to go so unless everyone stays in a good mood and keeps our chins up'* then '*If you don't feel happy …. [it] causes a lot of trouble at work'.* So '*I find the time… to wheel round containers [and] stop by let's say for 30 seconds to say 'hello' or 'how are they doing', also*

sometimes [say] something funny you know and they will burst out into a fit of laughter and you know my job done, and then move on to other people …….. But for me it's important that people are smiling and laughing and so that's a typical day'.

It can be seen that the very same material space transmogrifies into different emplacements as managers enter and leave. The Worker thus moves between two very different spaces, albeit within the same material place, and as he moves the self who speaks changes: a different subject with a different identity emerges. In one he speaks as the objectified, denigrated worker denied recognition of himself as anything other than the mere appendage of a machine, a machine to which he is tied, unable to move out of its orbit. In the other he moves away from the machine and speaks as a subject who finds pleasure (and thus I suggest, meaning) in a working life that allows him to constitute himself as 'a species being'.

The third principle is that each emplacement is governed by different norms and regulations.

Continuing with the above example, and my own remembered experience, the norms that govern a space when managers are present is that managerial orders must be obeyed, and those orders are concerned with maximising production. Managers must watch over staff, in the sense of ensuring they are conforming with rules and regulations. Staff, on the other hand, must conform with the norms of hierarchy and give the impression of being focused totally upon the achievement of workplace objectives. As we have seen, when managers are present the Worker follows the rules: he occupies a fixed place, by the machine, and his focus is on the

officially ordained task of sorting the mail. His identity is abject, no more than that of a robot. When managers are absent, the Worker has the freedom to walk around, and the focus turns to the social world of the workplace where the identities that become available are those of social beings engaged in ensuring mutual (albeit constrained) flourishing.

It follows (the fourth principle) that *what is regarded as deviant and what is regarded as normative change as the place shape-shifts.* The notion that staff can wander around, sharing a joke and engaging in conversation, so not focusing on maximising efficiency or output, would be totally alien in manager-governed space. Similarly, the worker who focuses totally on working as hard as possible in the absence of managers would be regarded as deviant by fellow occupants of that emplacement, as numerous studies starting with the Hawthorne Studies (Mayo, 1949) have shown.

Thus, fifth, each space has its own regime of emotions, embodiment, self- and identity-making. In the worker's account affect in manager-dominated space is described as negative (frustration and anger), but it switches to one of laughter and sociality in worker-dominated space. The very materiality of the body seems to change when managers enter and leave. In one space the body must adapt itself to the demands of the machine, while in another it is freer and can move away from the machine that otherwise governs its every movement.

It follows (Principle *6) that there are different conceptions of 'work' in each space.* This example shows that how work is conceived shifts as different emplacements

come to occupy the same place. The Worker may be situated in exactly the same position, bounded by the same walls and working with the same machinery, but when managers are present the space is management-governed, and work is defined within a managerialist frame that requires a focus on the maximising of output, efficiency, production, etc. When managers are absent, the conception of work expands to incorporate the sociality of the workplace. Work here is carried out as part of a social world in which relationship-building and maintenance is included in the unwritten job description.

Discussion: towards a theory of making work and identity meaningful in the organizational quotidian

The examples I have used to develop this theory of organizations as polytopias, or multiple emplacements within single material spaces, has focused on only one material space with only two co-existent emplacements. Even at this simple level it can be seen that work emplacements are labile and fissile: staff move fluidly from moment to moment into and out of different emplacements as if into and out of different dimensions, and as they do so their possible selves or identities shift and change.

But the major arguments derived from this theory, in relation to accounts of meaningful work, is that meaningful work and the identities it makes possible is not absent from contemporary workplaces but rather, under the weight of management theory and practice, and indeed of critical analysis, remains hidden. ‘Meaningful work’, in this account, refers to the areas of freedom that are carved out, moment to moment,

in the absence of managers, so that 'work' is defined by those doing the work rather than by management. This is a self-governing identity. The self may be alienated from its self when in an emplacement subject to the managerial gaze. At that time the 'I' becomes an extension of the machine, located in a web of managerial rules and norms. But when that managerial gaze is absent and the worker moves into a different emplacement, the self that is constituted is a social self that emerges through interactions with others within the physical, but not psychical, confines of 'the organization'. The 'product' that is achieved while in that space is not so much what the employer demands, although that may be produced too, but a self as a 'species being' that contributes to the flourishing of the people gathered together in that material place.

I am thus suggesting that in the conditions of neoliberal capitalism, 'meaningful work' and the identities it facilitates is something that is defined and constituted by the worker when unconstrained by managerial presence. It is achieved through various forms of meaning-making. In my own memory of what appeared to be a totally-governed workplace, and that of the Worker whose account I've given above, meaning emerged through social interactions, through 'species being'. 'Meaningful work' here then refers to the ability to socialise with other people, and thus to achieve recognition and identity (Butler, 1991; 1993) and a sense of self. In other workplaces or for other people 'meaningful work' may be defined differently, but it would be something worked on outside the norms or rules that constrain the possibilities for being and becoming in that particular organization. It co-exists with meaningless, alienated work, that is, it occurs the same material place but in a very different emplacement. This

'meaningful identity constitution at work' is a social activity that contributes to individual and general flourishing of the people working together. 'Seeing' workplaces in this way as polytopias involves an ontological politics (Law, 2006) that strives to avoid unwittingly repressing what 'fails to fit the standard package of common-sense realism' (op cit, p. 10). Rather, this theory of polytopias opens possibilities for conceiving of ontological multitudes, and understanding how meaningful work emerges despite neoliberalist capitalism's attempts to quash it.

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